Reading in the Gulf: Is it time for a re-focus?

Andrew O'Sullivan
Andrew O’Sullivan is the Academic Coordinator for the Diploma Department at Dubai Women’s College, Higher Colleges of Technology in the U.A.E. Over the past 25 years he has taught in Ireland, Sudan, Malaysia and the U.A.E. He has presented at conferences and published articles on teaching vocabulary, reading, teacher-training, e-learning and testing.
In this article I would like make the case that many Gulf Arab college students have a significant ‘deficit’ in their English language reading skills. I will argue that the reasons for this shortfall are many and the interplay among different factors is complex. In order to take something of an ‘Occam’s Razor’ to the thorny and complicated question of how we can improve our students’ English reading competence, I am going to propose that we need to focus the major part of our efforts on improving two elements of our students’ reading development: the so called ‘bottom-up’ reading elements; and the acquisition and development of vocabulary. I do this as I feel there have been a multitude of diverse initiatives and responses to our students’ reading issues over the years. From my own personal experience I can cite a plethora of efforts I have been involved in including: extended reading programmes, reading in the community, reading portfolios, reading competitions, reading speed software, intensive online reading, and sustained silent reading. The wide variety of programmes and schemes can certainly point to some success. I fully acknowledge the pedagogic and motivational desirability of varied and diverse reading activities for students yet I would also argue that in tandem with such efforts to assist our learners develop their English reading skills we should also urgently examine the apparent need to address many of our students’ fundamental problems with English reading skills.

Alderson (2000) summarizes recent accounts of what comprises fluent reading as a process which is “rapid, purposeful, motivated, interactive…. it is comprehending (readers expect to understand), it is flexible, and it develops gradually” (p. 14). The ability to read confidently, efficiently and fluently in English is a key academic and professional enabler for many Gulf Arab learners. This reading skill has to encompass a wide range of text types, modes and discourses. Meaningful access to information and resources vital to learning in all subject areas requires students to be proficient and sophisticated English language readers.

English language teachers in the UAE and in other Arab countries recount that many students struggle to read at a level of proficiency appropriate to their current and future needs. Beyond the notion of the ‘perceived’ problem with reading, this professional judgement is supported by data such as that given in Table 1 below, taken from the IELTS Annual Review of 2006 and 2007. These reviews include a comparison of results by country of origin and by mother tongue for the 20 countries which use the IELTS tests most and also for the most common mother tongues of test-takers.

Table 1. Mean bands and international rankings for IELTS reading exams in 2006 and 2007.

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<tr>
<th>IELTS Mean Bands (Rankings)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Reading Academic (Ranking out of 20)</td>
<td>Reading General Training (Ranking out of 20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using Arabic as first language (2006)</td>
<td>5.52 (Joint 18th)</td>
<td>5.10 (20th )</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using Arabic as first language (2007)</td>
<td>5.31 (20th )</td>
<td>5.04 (20th )</td>
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<td>UAE nationals (2006 report)</td>
<td>5.10 (20th )</td>
<td>4.07 (20th )</td>
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<td>UAE nationals (2007 report)</td>
<td>4.96 (20th )</td>
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As the table shows, whilst mean scores on both reading tests were low for test-takers with Arabic as their mother tongue, the mean scores obtained by UAE students on both reading tests were even lower in both years.

As recounted in O’Sullivan (2004) this ‘reading problem’ is often seen as rooted in negative prior learning experiences from school. Mustafa’s (2002) extensive interviews with UAE high school teachers and students, and UAE college faculty lead him to conclude that ‘the school graduates’
[English] reading abilities are extremely poor" (p. 117). Mustafa's research reveals that much of school based language teaching is based on outmoded methodology and that students themselves highlight this phenomenon when accounting for their failure to develop positive attitudes towards the language. Mustafa characterizes the situation in UAE schools as heavily distorted by a kind of negative backwash with teachers using “the transmission model to deliver information to exam takers” (p. 2). Standardized testing does not encourage the development of reading skills. Mustafa in his examination of the teaching of the reading skill in UAE schools concluded from interview data that “ninety per cent of the teachers perceive reading as a pronunciation exercise” (p. 77); “teachers teach only one reading strategy that enables students to obtain explicit information from a graded passage; a kind of literal comprehension” (p. 78). He goes on to state that “almost all correlate ‘reading’ with pronouncing and reading aloud” (p. 79). Teachers are very heavily focused on helping their students prepare for state examinations in English and as a result the school subject of English is more of a ‘cramming’ and exam preparation exercise than a communicative language learning experience. He also describes how teachers and students in the schools he studied made minimal use of their school libraries. Although the school English language learning experience of UAE national students is their own and unique in many respects, it can be argued that they share the pan-Arab experience pinpointed by Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) that English:

is a school subject rather than a means of communication. The pass mark is often very low, which means that learners can proceed to further learning of the language without having first mastered fully what they ought to have mastered [italics added] in, say, a given school year. (p. 2)

The concern about weak reading skills is not limited to the confines of academia. Among policy makers too there is disquiet. The Federal National Council of the UAE noted that tertiary level institutions in the country are having to dedicate considerable resources to equip students with the language skills necessary for coping with academic life (Hoath, 2004).

In O’Sullivan (2004) I reviewed the various explanations for the situation that are proffered. Are current young Arab learners’ reading attitudes and performance in English evidence of the contemporary ‘post-linguistic’ culture, where visual images are ousting the dominance of traditional printed text? (Fairclough, 1989). More commonly, other variables are pinpointed. The following are some of the main influences cited: ‘reading culture’ at home, in school and in the wider community; L1 reading standards; cultural schemata; methods of teaching; backwash from testing; and learner motivation, interest and attitude. Very often it is the negative impact of these factors that is stressed. There is a lack of a reading culture or reading habit in society because of the prized oral tradition in Gulf societies according to Shannon (2003). This ‘cultural deficit’ view however is not uncontested. In fact, Mokhtari and Reichard (2004) refer to the common misconception among educators about certain cultures’ (including Arab cultures’) deficiencies when it comes to reading comprehension. The phenomena of ‘diglossia’ may be present to some extent with UAE students just as it is in other Arab countries where standard Arabic is actually students’ second language with colloquial Arabic as their ‘mother tongue’ (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983). This line of argument has several implications. The most significant are that reading skills in Arabic for many students are at second language interlanguage levels and that English is actually their third language. Many UAE students allegedly lack certain general background knowledge and global awareness. A higher level of such awareness could facilitate their English reading development it is argued.

Different aspects of Arabic learners’ of English experiences with English reading comprehension are well documented. Much of the focus has been on ‘problems’ these learners face. Researchers have looked at the ‘higher-level’ areas such as syntactic processing and rhetorical structure, conceptual and cultural schemata, and learner attitude and motivation. Although there has also been work focusing on other elements of the ESL reading process, too.
The challenge of determining the causal relationships between the complex range of influences affecting the acquisition of reading in another language, some of which I have alluded to above in the case of Arabic speaking learners of English, is immense. What I would like to argue is that there are key areas which warrant our attention as classroom practitioners and allow us to focus effort in an effective and efficient way when addressing the reading problem many of our students have. By doing this, we may help prevent a dissipation of resources, skill, effort and expertise as teachers. We may also better attend to the concerns of our students seeking to achieve discernible improvement in their English reading fluency levels and performance with the associated motivational benefits such progress would bring. As Anderson (2005) points out: “only when a basic level of reading fluency has been achieved is a reader’s attention free for comprehension - the real purpose of reading” (p. 3).

There are two main issues which should be priorities in developing our students’ English reading. These two areas have gone through a period where they were ignored, out of favour, unfashionable or just not ‘mainstream.’ Firstly, from observation and consideration of our students with poor performance in English language reading, we can argue that the English language reading comprehension difficulties of these native Arabic speakers may be due to deficient lower level processes such as letter and word identification. Abu-Rabia (2002) echoes this concern pointing out the roles of phonology, morphology and sentence structure in Arabic reading emphasizing the key role of triliteral/quadriliteral roots in Arabic visual-orthographic processing. Secondly, students, teachers and researchers all cite the lack of vocabulary and poor reading speeds as further handicaps to effective reading.

The first area is the ‘bottom-up’ elements of reading competence for learners of English recently ‘revived’ as a subject for consideration in our profession by Birch (2002). As Anderson (2005) argues, “a top-down approach can only be effective once a learner has achieved a degree of automaticity in the bottom-up skills of letter recognition and word identification. If this is not in place, readers can remain perpetually ‘word-bound’” (p. 2). In Koda’s (2005) superb synthesis of second-language reading research it is noted that “word recognition refers to the process of obtaining words’ sounds and meanings, and decoding deals specifically with the extraction of phonological information” (p. 29). Many of our learners are facing problems in these two areas with their reading. This is of great concern because “inefficient word recognition takes long-term tolls, directly and indirectly, on the acquisition of reading competence” (p. 31). Koda reports that studies of word-recognition repeatedly confirm that skilled readers are capable of analysing and manipulating word-internal elements – this is through the automaticity of their reading with regard to word recognition and decoding. The more automaticity achieved with certain elements of processing, the more fluent and proficient a language user becomes. Failure to achieve automaticity means “learners typically stay at the faltering, controlled processing stage.” Ensuring automaticity in reading tasks such as “word recognition, phonemic/graphemic decoding, and syntactic feature recognition” can help “free up memory and cognition for the type of fluent reading that requires constant attention and effort” (Yoshimura, 2000). Decoding efficiency is a key factor involving the speed and accuracy of getting key lexical information involving sound, symbol and meaning from print. This efficiency “is a partial, but significant, indicator of both vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency” (Koda, 2005, p. 69). This is echoed by Paran (1997) who states that “good readers are characterised by fluent, automated use of bottom-up processes” and that it is the job of teachers to “encourage the development of automaticity, helping students become good decoders.” Paran goes on to argue that “second language teachers should encourage the development of automaticity, helping students become good decoders” and “expose learners to large quantities of print to encourage automaticity of word recognition skills.”

The failure of poor readers to master the so-called lower level order elements of reading competency results in them leaning heavily on contextual reliance strategies to “compensate for
their underdeveloped visual-information sampling skills," Koda reports (2005, p. 35). However, paradoxically, the problems students have with lack of automaticity impede the efficient application of top-down knowledge-based processing strategies (Atari, 2004). To be effective users of top-down strategies learners need to be effective bottom-up processors (Stott, 2001). I wish to underline the critical role such basic processing skills play in the reading profile of a language learner. Furthermore, I believe that many of our weak readers at institutions across the Gulf need considerable help in this key domain. This help has to be systematic. What we require are proper effective diagnostic tools to clearly identify learners’ needs in this regard. This is a key requirement given that weak or limited readers may have a variety of strategies that enable them to get the right answer in a typical reading comprehension test even though they are failing to, or unable to interact with the text in a meaningful and comprehending way (Anderson, 2005). Moreover, we need elaborated pedagogic tools and strategies to help our young adult learners overcome deficits they may have in their bottom-up reading processes. Working on these processes with this group (young adults) often calls for different approaches than are utilized with younger learners where a lot of work has taken place with regard to developing these processes in L1 reading. This is another challenge when considering this issue.

My other main thrust in this paper is to argue that in order to address the reading deficit of many HCT students we need to look at vocabulary and lexis. Folse (2008) reports that for many learners vocabulary is the key concern in all areas of their language learning “when students ask questions in class--regardless of the class, the question is almost always about vocabulary. (Yes, even in the grammar class, students ask about vocabulary, not grammar)!” There is certainly a widely acknowledged relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary. Many students are very aware of the key role of vocabulary in reading and will often sum up the problem with a difficult reading passage: “there are too many unknown words in this text.” Research shows a more significant correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension than other factors. Singhal (2005), summarizing current research concludes: “…an improvement in reading comprehension can be attributed to an increase in vocabulary knowledge and that increased proficiency in high frequency vocabulary also leads to an increase in reading proficiency” (p. 157). Koda (2005) says that in more recent investigations we find a view that argues “a two-way reciprocal affiliation where the two [reading comprehension and vocabulary proficiency] are mutually interdependent during their development” (p. 49). Vocabulary knowledge engenders reading comprehension, but the relationship is more complex than often portrayed. Vocabulary competence helps enable reading comprehension and reading comprehension helps expand vocabulary. “In the earlier stages, for example, it is vocabulary knowledge that facilitates reading acquisition. In the later stages, however, vocabulary learning entails conceptual expansion” (Koda, 2005, p. 69). What we are able to state however is that “lexical knowledge is the strongest predictor of reading ability (and inability)” (Cobb, 2007, p. 102).

Despite the recent re-emergence of vocabulary as a central concern of language teaching (O’Sullivan, 2007), I believe considerable effort is still required in the development of vocabulary teaching and learning strategies and pedagogy. Cobb (2007) advises us that “the vocabulary needs of Arabic learners must be organized and planned for because they will not be met by magic” (p. 117). Given the key role of vocabulary in the successful development of reading skills we must heed this counsel more closely and plan for action. I argue that a systematic and elaborated approach to vocabulary needs to be a key priority at the heart of the teaching and learning process for English language courses for Gulf Arab learners.

For this to take place, we need to see what we have, look to find out more, and to develop our pedagogy, practice and materials based on experience and what we find out. For example, among different teachers, departments and colleges throughout the HCT system there are various efforts underway regarding the acquisition, teaching and learning of vocabulary. Pathare’s (2007) award winning vocabulary course developed for use with Diploma Foundations students at Dubai Women’s College is one impressive example of such an effort. Grounded in
the latest vocabulary research, imbued with a strong awareness of the needs and context of the target learners, and originally conceived as an M.Ed. dissertation study, Pathare’s work exemplifies some of the key elements I argue should inform the development of our approach to the development of vocabulary learning programmes. These initiatives need to be reviewed and presented through shared forum allowing displays, exchanges and discussion of best practices, and the invaluable knowledge created then needs to be aggregated allowing it to be retained and shared further. Gu (2003) states that there needs to be “more bottom-up empirical effort on different aspects of vocabulary learning at different stages of acquisition for different learners in various cultural and educational contexts” helping answer the many concerns about vocabulary pedagogy and acquisition beyond the presentation and retention of words and acknowledging the unique context and profile of our Gulf Arab learners. To help this happen more classroom-based action research should be encouraged as a strategic professional development priority across institutions.

Teaching and learning materials and resources (including time) need to reflect the latest research on vocabulary and lexis in language learning. For example, recent research on ‘critical lexical mass’ through improved word lists could be used to help students achieve more lexical proficiency (Neufeld & Billuroğlu, 2006). Our language curricula and assessments need to reflect the importance of vocabulary and its key role in enabling language skills (including reading) development. There should be a more explicit central role for appropriate level word lists to inform teaching and learning of English and in the design of language learning outcomes and their assessment.

To conclude then, my proposal is that we need to refocus energy and resources on developing approaches, materials and strategies for the systematic improvement of our students’ bottom-up reading processes and their vocabulary learning and acquisition. I am urging that the focus of effort and resources be primarily concentrated on research and development of these two areas as urgent priorities. I am not arguing for the exclusion of other elements of reading programmes, or other reading improvement strategies, but we must move away from what Paran (1997) calls the “over-reliance” on top down models or what Meara (1980) described as the neglect of vocabulary.

References


